

# Studying African Religions in the 21st Century

## (Re)setting the Agenda

Abel Ugba and Adriaan van Klinken

In 2015, the African Association for the Study of Religions (AASR) launched its own journal, called *Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and the African Diaspora*. In his editorial to the inaugural issue, the Editor in Chief at that time, Afe Adogame, rightly marked this as a ‘significant milestone in AASR’s history’ and a ‘systematic progression in published output by the AASR’ (Adogame 2015, 1). Since its foundation during an IAHR<sup>1</sup> Regional Conference at the University of Zimbabwe in Harare, Zimbabwe, in September 1992, the promotion and dissemination of publications on the religions of Africa, especially by scholars based on the African continent, has been a major aim of the AASR. The journal was a major step forward in achieving this aim, especially because it was published open access, meaning that its content ‘will be accessible to the widest academic and general public’ (Adogame 2015, 1). The decision at the time was to publish the journal on the AASR website, and since then six volumes have been published, including several special issues, under the editorial leadership of Adogame and his deputy editors, J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu and Corey L. Williams, with the support of a larger editorial board.

If the launch of the journal in 2015 was a milestone, then the current relaunch of the journal ten years later, is another significant progression, for two reasons. First, the journal has been given a new name, *Utambuzi*, with the previous title now serving as sub-title. ‘Utambuzi’ is a word derived from kiSwahili, that can be translated as ‘insight’, ‘diagnosis’ or ‘recognition’. These meanings capture the journal’s key objectives:

- 1) to provide empirical and theoretical *insight* into the ever-changing landscape of religion on the African continent and its global diaspora, both historically and today.
- 2) to *diagnose*, or critically analyse and evaluate, the complex roles of religious belief and practice in African social, cultural, political, and economic spheres, examining how religion intersects with other social categories and structures of power.
- 3) to *recognize* the importance of African-centric perspectives, methodologies, and modes of theorizing, as a contribution to global knowledge production about religion as well as about Africa and its diaspora.

The latter objective, of recognizing African-centric perspectives, is explicitly reflected in the journal’s new name. Using a KiSwahili name is a symbolic gesture, acknowledging the

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<sup>1</sup> IAHR is the International Association for the History of Religions. AASR has been a regional member association of IAHR since 1995.

importance of language in what Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) called 'decolonising the mind', and signalling what Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2018) has described as 'epistemic freedom in Africa'. It underlines the journal's commitment to the ongoing quest for decolonizing African religions, and the scholarship thereof (P'Bitek 2011), and the promotion of 'African traditions in the study of religion in Africa' (Adogame et al. 2012). KiSwahili is an African (Bantu) language spoken in a growing number of countries by an ever-increasing number of people of various ethnic backgrounds, and incorporating loanwords from a range of other languages, most notably Arabic and other African indigenous languages, but also Portuguese, English, and German. As such, KiSwahili is recognized as a 'globalized world language' (Moshi 2006), demonstrating the entanglements of Africa – its societies, cultures, knowledges –, with other parts of the world. *Utambuzi* seeks to study the religions of Africa and its diaspora in these multiple entanglements of an ever-globalizing world (Meyer 2021).

Second, the journal moves to a new digital platform, hosted by UJ Press, a division of the University of Johannesburg Library. The journal's previous incorporation in the AASR website turned out to be limiting its circulation and dissemination. The step towards publishing with UJ Press demonstrates the commitment of AASR to the continued professionalization of the journal. We will greatly benefit from the expertise of UJ Press in strengthening the journal's reputation, its inclusion in relevant scholarly indexes, and promoting its accessibility via a new digital platform. Of course, publishing the journal with an Africa-based publisher also aligns with our vision of promoting not only scholarship about, but also from, the continent.

At the occasion of this relaunch, the journal's editorial leadership has been renewed, with Abel Ugba taking over from Adogame as Editor in Chief, and with a new team of deputy editors (Telesia Musili, James Kwateng-Yeboah, and Chammah Kaunda), managing editors (Diana Lunkwitz and Ruth Amwe) and book and film review editors (Murtala Ibrahim and Tshenolo Madigele) in place as well as with a new International Advisory Board. Publishing a journal like *Utambuzi* is a great collective effort, and we invite all members of AASR to contribute to this: by submitting their work to the journal; by volunteering to review submissions; by reviewing books and films for the journal; by proposing special issues; by reading and sharing scholarship published in the journal, assigning it to their students and using it in their classes, etcetera. Last but not least, the journal being published open access—with authors publishing their work for free, and readers accessing it for free—, we encourage everyone to support the journal and make it financially viable (because publishing open access does come with certain expenses). This can be done by joining AASR as a member, paying annual membership fees and/or making a donation in support of the journal.<sup>2</sup>

### **(Re)setting the Agenda**

We mark and celebrate the relaunch of *Utambuzi: Journal for the Study of the Religions of Africa and the African Diaspora* with a special issue which has the ambitious aim of '(re)setting the agenda' for the study of African religions in the twenty-first century. This theme is inspired by the observation that African religions, both on the continent and within the diaspora, witness significant levels of vitality in the contemporary period, and are undergoing profound transformations amidst rapid cultural, social, political, and economic changes. These transformations manifest in various ways, including:

- Increased forms of exchange, hybridity and syncretism among religions, with the boundaries between different traditions being crossed and becoming blurred, and with new assemblages of religious beliefs and practices emerging constantly (Chidester 2012; Ibrahim 2023; Janson 2021; Williams 2019). Alongside the

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<sup>2</sup> If you wish to make a donation, please do so via this link: <https://donate.stripe.com/8wMaGb1NL4lp01OaEE>.

emergence of new religious movements within African Christianities and Islams (Anderson 2018; Østebø 2022), which often are antagonistic towards indigenous religions yet draw on their symbolic registers in complex ways, there also is a renewed interest in, and reaffirmation of indigenous spirituality, not seldom as a sign of resistance to the ‘foreign’ religions of Christianity and Islam, but often also blending creatively with these religions (Adogame 2022; Olupona 2011).

- Expanding the global reach of African religions, including Christianity, Islam and indigenous traditions, as a result of long-standing and more recent patterns of migration, new global flows of ideas and images through current media technologies, and other forms of continued and accelerated globalization (Mutema 2010; Hackett and Soares 2015). In an increasingly pluricentric global geopolitical configuration, the reach of African religions can be observed not only in Europe and the Americas, but also in Asia and the Arab world—regions which, on their turn, also influence religious developments on the African continent (Premawardhana 2019; Shi and Li 2022). This manifests in new transnational networks and global alliances which demonstrate the aforementioned entanglements of African religions in our globalized world.
- New salience of religion in popular culture, the public domain and political spheres, underlining the continued and ever-growing relevance of religious practice for understanding processes of building as well as contesting nation-states, cultures of health, democracy and human rights, socio-economic development, and cultural production, such as through film, music, and literature (Atiemo 2013; Chitando, Gunda and Togarasei 2020; Ntarangwi 2016; McClendon and Riedl 2019). A critical line of inquiry here is also how this new salience of religion affects, and often politicizes around, issues of gender and sexuality, especially as women, as well as sexual and gender minorities, are becoming increasingly visible and claiming their space in African religious worlds (Dube et al. 2024; Oládémọ 2022; Parsitau and Aura 2021; van Klinken and Chitando 2021).

Acknowledging these transformations, this special issue aims to spark a multi-perspective discussion on these developments and their implications for the academic study of African religions, and to (re)set the scholarly agenda of the field. It provides a platform for leading and emerging experts in the field to: contextualize current developments; identify key methodological and theoretical issues; and propose new directions, paradigms, and themes to guide future research. We invited a range of scholars—from various career stages and backgrounds—to offer reflections on the following questions, while drawing on their own research context, expertise and interests:

- 1) What do you see as the most promising trends and developments in the field, and why?
- 2) What do you see as the critical questions and urgent issues that need to be addressed for the field to advance, and how are these to be addressed?
- 3) What themes, perspectives, or subjects are currently underrepresented in the field, and why and how are these to be included?
- 4) How would you like the field to develop thematically, theoretically, and methodologically in the next decade or two? In other words, how do you envision the future of the study of African religions?

The individual responses of the contributors to our invitation translate into a bold and thought-provoking collection of seven articles and one book review that reimagines the study of African

religions in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With fresh insights and critical engagement, the contributors challenge long-standing assumptions and frameworks, and pave new paths to explore and dissect African religions in Africa and the diasporas. Covering themes such as Pentecostal political engagement, migration, climate change, decolonial approaches, and the geopolitics of Islam, the articles spark essential conversations that will inspire and challenge scholars at all levels.

In the opening article, Igboin interrogates the theoretical construct of ‘Africa’ that continues to shape religious studies, calling for a decolonial-pluriversal approach that situates African worldviews within a broader epistemological landscape. Lunkwitz extends this critique by tracing the colonial legacies embedded in the academic study of African religions, utilizing Liberia as a case study to reveal how Christian-European ‘civilizing’ projects continue to influence knowledge production. Wild-Wood further complicates conventional approaches by examining the methodological tensions between studying African religions as singular traditions versus embracing the complexity of lived religious plurality.

Turning to contemporary geopolitical forces, Ibrahim explores how the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is reshaping Islamic landscapes in Africa and influencing religious identities and movements, particularly in Jos, Nigeria. Bompani shifts the focus to Pentecostalism and politics, offering a groundbreaking framework to understand how spiritual beliefs shape voter behaviour, political decision-making and modern governance across Africa.

Kwateng-Yeboah, in his contribution, seeks to reorient migration studies by challenging the dominant focus on destination countries. Instead, he emphasizes the religious dimensions of both migrants and those who aspire to migrate. Tarusarira and Maviza take on another underexplored frontier—the intersection of climate change and religion—demonstrating how climate-induced security risks in northern Mozambique reshape religious interpretations, practices and community resilience.

Finally, Amwe’s review of *Seductive Spirit: Deliverance, Demons, and Sexual Worldmaking in Ghanaian Pentecostalism* offers a nuanced critique of Ghanaian Pentecostalism, revealing how deliverance practices complicate mainstream conceptualizations of demonology, sexuality and spirituality within a decolonial framework.

Together, the articles in this issue push the boundaries of religious studies, offering a timely and significant re-examination of how religion operates in African and diasporic contexts. More than just advancing scholarly debates, they lay the foundation for future research at the intersections of religion, politics, migration, climate change, and global geopolitics, urging scholars to rethink the ways African religions shape and are shaped by an ever-changing world.

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